

WHAT ISSUE BEGAN THE 490-YEAR PROPHECY?

Decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem – the city Or Decree to restore Jerusalem – the people

Introduction

The determination of the onset date for Daniel's 70-week prophecy remains a disputed concern within the Christian world because the issue for the decree has captured the minds of literalists.

- The pivotal verse is Daniel 9:25.
“Know therefore and understand, *that* from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince *shall be* seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.”

Daniel (and his readers) are to **know** and **understand** what Gabriel is saying.

- This is a follow-up to verse 23: “therefore **understand** the matter, and consider the vision” and Gabriel’s promise that he would understand (“I am now come forth **to give thee skill and understanding**” – vs 22).
- The word for “vision” here is *mareh*.
- When all of the *mareh* messages are linked together in Daniel 8–10 and 12, a beautiful theme unfolds.
- It is a story of God’s covenant restoration of man.
- In contradistinction to the word *chazown* (vision), which in Daniel 8–12 describes Satan’s opposition to God’s restoration.

Though Daniel struggled cognitively and emotionally over the messages of chapters 8–12, he specifically said he finally understood the *mareh* vision in 10:1.

- What is Daniel and his reader to know?
- The first item in 9:25 is the beginning point – “from” – 70 weeks of years.
- This is a key to understanding this prophecy and the onset of the 2300-year prophecy of Daniel 8:14 – a *mareh* vision also! An important link to understand.

Why study this verse regarding a commandment of restoration?

1. God said we should understand it.
2. There is no such decree or proclamation in the Bible regarding the physical city.
3. Opinion in the religious world is diverse – most Protestants accepting 444 B.C. because of repairing the walls and gates.
 - All this means that the years of Christ’s anointing, crucifixion, birth and
 - The end of the 2300 years will vary, depending on when it begins and maybe **why** it begins!

Many accept 457 B.C. with Artaxerxes I’s decree to Ezra – but – no such record exists in the Bible or in archeological finds relative to a geographic place (i.e., the physical city).

- The official Adventist DARCOM Series, vol. 3, p. 65, reading “70 weeks,” Leviticus and Nature of Prophecy Book admits this challenging issue!
- Complicating this is the conclusion of most historical/critical scholars that the 490-year prophecy ended in 164 B.C. tied to:
 - Syrian wars against the Jews
 - And associated with Antiochus Epiphanes IV

The beginning or *terminus a quo* of the seventy “sevens” means everything to advent people.

- Because “times of the end” prophecies are tied directly to this starting point (Daniel 8:17, 19).

Gabriel’s First Words

“From the going forth” sets the onset of the sequence in Gabriel’s message.

- “Going forth” is a Hebrew word (*mosa*) [mowtsa].
- It refers to “issuing” or “going forth” – a commandment.
- Thus, there is a **source** and **a time** it goes out and an **objective** (to be defined).

He then says what goes out is an order to restore and rebuild.

- The word for this order is *dabar*.
- It is interpreted in a variety of ways in different translations.
 - Commandment (KJV), command
 - Decree (NASB)
 - Word (Hebrew)
 - KJV translates it 80 different ways.¹

¹ Harris, R. Laird; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 399.

Thus, at a point in time, some restoration/rebuild decree will be made on behalf of God's people.

- The decree involves restoration and building of Jerusalem.
- Building of the street (singular) – presumably of Jerusalem (literal – “plaza” or “moat”)
- Building of the wall – presumably of Jerusalem

There is a very important question that must be introduced here and then answered:

- Are the words “Jerusalem,” “street,” “walls,” “plaza” or “moat” referring to *literal* structures or
- Are they symbols of a *spiritual* restoration tied to the same words?

The Restorer – Decree One

Approximately 150 years before (690 B.C.) Isaiah prophesied of Cyrus:

“Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I *am* the LORD that maketh all *things*; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise [men] backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish; That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; **that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof:** That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: **That saith of Cyrus, He *is* my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid”** (Isaiah 44:24-28).

“Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus ... I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: **he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives**, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 45:1a,13).

God specifically called Cyrus by *endearing* names before he was born.

- He would be the one to lay the foundation for the temple.
- He would begin to rebuild Jerusalem to be inhabited.

Cyrus the Medo-Persian general and its king (Cyrus the Great, also called Cyrus II):

- Defeated the Babylonian Empire
- Was told of the ancient prophecies of what he would do by Daniel
- Decreed in 538/537 in his first year to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2-4, II Chronicles 36:22-23).

The Cyrus Decree

The key record of Cyrus' decree is mainly Biblical – some scholars claim the “Cyrus Cylinder” also support this – but that's vague.

- In the Biblical recorded decree, only the temple is noted.
- Yet, God had said that Cyrus would initiate the process of rebuilding the city related to it:
 - Being inhabited
 - Even other cities in Judah “shall be built” (Isaiah 44:26)

The following year (536 B.C.) 50,000 Jewish exiles made their trek back to Jerusalem.

- Tied to this time, Daniel recorded a most unique thought as he studied the prophecies of Jeremiah and the 70-year Babylonian captivity prophecy.
- He said that he understood those messages, the “number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord (*dabar* – YHWH) came to Jeremiah the prophet” – then this key phrase: “that He would accomplish seventy years in desolation of Jerusalem” (Daniel 9:2).

Desolation refers to the utter decimation or destruction of Jerusalem, the City.

- It suggests that at the end of the 70 literal years of Babylonian captivity
- The desolation issue would be addressed
- The city would become inhabitable once again
- The center of worship (temple) would become a reality

Cyrus appointed Zerubbabel (Shesh-bazzar) – “the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8) as governor of the company and Joshua, the high priest, to work with him.

- It is not known when the Jewish people began this journey.
- It likely took 4-5 months (Ezra 7:9).

It is important to note that the people began to settle in the cities before the work of the temple began – presumably, this included Jerusalem.

“And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel **were in the cities**, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear *was* upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, *even* burnt offerings morning and evening. They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as *it is* written, ... From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. **But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.**” (Ezra 3:1, 3, 4a, 6).

Since they “were in the cities,” it is clear that they had **first** addressed their places to live:

- Since the feasts were based upon a sacred calendar
- Since the seventh month was sacred (three feasts occurred then – the last being Tabernacles)
- Their assembling “as one man” on Tishri 1 is significant

Do we have additional information that they inhabited the cities first?

- Haggai 1:11 tells us.
- The foundation for the temple was laid, but the construction was stopped.
“Then came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, *Is it* time for you, O ye, **to dwell in your ceiled houses**, and this house *lie* waste? ... Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways.... Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that *is* waste, and **ye run every man unto his own house**” (Haggai 1:3-4, 7, 9b).

Though not specific in Cyrus’ recorded decree, he clearly meant the Jewish people to rebuild and restore as prophesied by God their homes and the temple.

- Does that mean 538-537 B.C. is when Daniel 9:25 is to be attributed?
- Daniel 9:25 states a specific **word** or decree would be issued to **restore** and **build** Jerusalem.
- What might *that* be?
- There must be something else important that is yet to be discovered.

The Darius Decree

Cyrus reigned for eight years (538-530 B.C.), then his son Cambyses II (529-522 B.C.), followed by six months of Psuedo-Smerdis (Guamata) (521 B.C.), then Darius I (The Great) (521-486 B.C.).

- The Bible says from Cyrus to Darius, the enemies of Judah and Benjamin, hired counselors against them to frustrate their plans (Ezra 4:5).
- A letter was written to Darius complaining about the Jewish temple activity – “it is not finished” (Ezra 6:16).

Darius wrote back confirming Cyrus’ decree and ordered: “Let the work of this house of God alone” (Ezra 6:7).

- Provision for tax money to go to the project was made.
- Provision for sacrificial animals was ordered by the provincial governors.
“I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed” (Ezra 6:12b).

The house was finished during the sixth year of Darius.

Approximately 23 years after the exiles first left Babylon, the temple was completed (Ezra 6:15).

- Nothing in Darius I’s decree meets the fulfillment of Daniel 9:25.

Times of Pathos over God's People

During the second year of Darius' reign, Zechariah was given amazing visions and messages from God.

- "Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto thee" (Zechariah 1:3).
- "Turn ye now from your evil ways."

Then the "angel of the Lord" asked the "Lord of hosts" a question:

- "How long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah?" (Zechariah 1:12).
- The "Lord of host" answered, "I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy" (Zechariah 1:14).
- "The Lord shall yet comfort Zion and shall yet choose Jerusalem" (Zechariah 1:17; cf. 2:12).

This is a distinct change in messages regarding God's people.

- Jerusalem is a metaphor for His people.
- He will judge and restore it spiritually again.
- The jealousy for Zion (God's dwelling place with His people) and Jerusalem (His people) represent a spiritual restoration totally unrelated to buildings, walls and streets.

This is further emphasized by the story of Joshua (the high priest), Satan and the Angel of the Lord:

- "I will clothe thee with a change of raiment" (Zechariah 3:4).
- "All who have put on the robe of Christ's righteousness will stand before Him as chosen and faithful and true. Satan has no power to pluck them out of the hand of the Saviour. Not one soul who in penitence and faith has claimed His protection will Christ permit to pass under the enemy's power. His word is pledged: 'Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me; and he shall make peace with Me.' Isaiah 27:5."²
- "As the people of God afflict their souls before Him, pleading for purity of heart, the command is given, 'Take away the filthy garments,' and the encouraging words are spoken, 'Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.' Zechariah 3:4. The spotless robe of Christ's righteousness is placed upon the tried, tempted, faithful children of God. The despised remnant are clothed in glorious apparel, nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world. Their names are retained in the Lamb's book of life, enrolled among the faithful of all ages. They have resisted the wiles of the deceiver; they have not been turned from their loyalty by the dragon's roar. Now they are eternally secure from the tempter's devices. Their sins are transferred to the originator of sin. A 'fair miter' is set upon their heads."³

² White, Ellen G.; *Prophets and Kings*, p. 587.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 591.

- At a time when the cities were being restored and the temple foundation laid, God's next message related to spiritual restoration and rebuilding.

Also, the entire imagery of spiritual restoration is seen in Daniel's prayer before he is approached by Gabriel (Daniel 9:4-19).

- Since Gabriel came in response to this prayer
- The prayer needs deeper examination

The desolation of the land and the bondage of the people related to their rebellion against the Sabbatical year (II Chronicles 36:21).

- That symbolized a time when everyone was "one" (just like in the heavenly Canaan).
- The land belonged to God.
- During this year, the land and people rested from all distractions, labor and secular activity.
- The focus was the "Lord of host."

Now – with their apostasy having been punished, what must be changed?

- Did Israel need walls, streets and buildings?
- They needed the Lord.
- They needed a true spiritual revival and a setting to once again worship.

As Daniel's prayer progresses, he sees the spiritual restoration as paramount.

- "Thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain" (vss 16-17)
- "Thy city which is called by thy name" (vs 18)
- "Thy city and thy people are called by thy name" (vs 19)
- "Supplication ... in behalf of the holy mountain (vs 20) of my God"

In verses 11-14 "us" represents "Jerusalem."

The Spiritual Decree!

Approximately 73 years after Zerubbabel and Joshua brought back to Judah the first wave of Jewish people:

- Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) came to the throne
- This was the era of Ezra and Nehemiah

Artaxerxes was acquainted with these men and “talked freely regarding the power of the God of heaven and the divine purpose in restoring the Jews to Jerusalem.”⁴

- Artaxerxes I gave a third decree (Ezra 7:12-28).
- There is **nothing** in it that articulates buildings, streets or walls.
- It is a beautiful invitation and directive to **reestablish the theocracy in Jerusalem**.
“Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?” (Ezra 7:23).

This decree and Ezra’s leadership led to a great revival in Israel.

- This decree was in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7).
- Nehemiah, a contemporary of Ezra (Nehemiah 8:1, 9),
- Noted the year was calculated as a fall-to-fall period (Nehemiah 1:1, 2:1).

From archeological and astronomical data, Artaxerxes came to power in the fall of 464 B.C.

- His seventh year would be 458-457 B.C.

Once revival was underway:

- Ezra went about dealing with ruins still obvious in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:11-16).
- It was during this time that the western governors of the empire wrote to Artaxerxes.
 - That “they are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations” (vs 12).
 - Then, impulsively, Artaxerxes decreed that this city not be rebuild (vs 21) “until a decree is made by me.”
- This clearly reveals that the original decree in 457 B.C. did **not** include building the city structure!

This rebuilding was likely 456 B.C.

- BUT – that is not the issue in Gabriel’s prophecy.
- The restoration of Jerusalem is the reestablishment of the theocracy of God’s people (commensurate with Daniel’s prayer) (“to build” (*banah*) can refer to the restoration of God’s people (Jeremiah 12:14-16).

What is the street (plaza) and wall (moat)?

- The wall (moat) is symbolic for something firmly decided (cf. Isaiah 10:23).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 608.

- The street (plaza or square) refers to the center of the city. This suggests that all the people of God will have firmly decided for Him – the center of their loyalty.

The damage later against the walls and gate by the Samaritans led Nehemiah, cupbearer of Artaxerxes I, to go to Jerusalem to repair the wall and gates (Nehemiah 1:3, 2:3). The work only took 52 days to complete. The restoration of the city itself was not his object.

Conclusion

The “word” or “decree” to restore or build Jerusalem refers exclusively to the restoration of God’s people once again into a theocratic state. Artaxerxes I’s decree, recorded in Ezra 7, meets those exact specifications.

Josephus notes that the year 457 B.C. was a Jubilee year. That would have deep spiritual significance for God’s people. It was then that land was restored to the rightful owners. Slaves were set free. That represents the ultimate release, restoration and freedom. It was in that year that Artaxerxes gave his decree.

This all coincides with the great *mareh* restoration message in Daniel when holiness will be adjudicated, God’s character vindicated.

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